

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Self-esteem, the New Christian "Virtue"

written by Bob DeWaay

"For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." (Romans 12:3)

"For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself." (Galatians 6:3)

"Every man's way is right in his own eyes, But the Lord weighs the hearts." (Proverb 21:2)

How one ought to feel about himself has become a significant issue for Christians. This topic did not receive much debate in previous generations since most Christians agreed that we are prone to pride and ought to have more humility. They recognized that the universal human tendency was to esteem oneself highly and look down at others. The ever present, Biblical admonitions to humble oneself were seen as a necessary mitigating influence to restrain the tendency to self-exaltation that is at the heart of the sin nature.

For example, consider the following passage: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3,4). This implies that we already look out for ourselves and regard ourselves as more important than others. Secular jargon shows this understanding. When someone is said to be "looking out for old number one," it is understood to be a reference to putting self first.

Most of the verses in the Bible that teach us how to regard ourselves do so in the context of our relationship with God and others. "Self talk, self concept, and

self-esteem" etc. are not major Biblical themes.

Romans 12:3 is a verse that specifically tells us how we ought to think about ourselves. Perhaps the reason for the lack of teaching on this subject is that we ought not to be spending much time thinking about self, since doing so is not a very worthwhile endeavor. If we do contemplate "self," **Romans 12:3** tells us not to think too highly of ourselves. Evidently this is the common tendency. If low self-esteem is a basic human problem, the inspired writers of Scripture were not aware of it.

Low Self-esteem Commended

Contrary to modern thinking, Scripture commends people with a low estimation of themselves. Consider the following passages:

"So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" (Luke 17:10)

"But the centurion answered and said, 'Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed.'" (Matthew 8:8) [this man was commended by Jesus - ". . . I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." (Matthew 8:10)]

"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" (Luke 15:21) [in this the prodigal was reconciled to his father]

"And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other

people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.'" (Luke 18:9-14)

In every one of these cases, Scripture commends people who evidenced a low opinion of themselves. This is but a small sampling of the many passages in which those who think highly of themselves are censured and those who think lowly of themselves commended.

This theme is just as prevalent in the Old Testament. Consider Samuel's rebuke of Saul, "And Samuel said, 'Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel'" (1Samuel 15:17) In **verse 12** of this chapter it is said that Saul ". . . set up a monument for himself. . ." As Samuel delivered the message that Saul was now being rejected as king over Israel, Saul had a last royal request, "I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel. . ." (1Samuel 15:30). Saul went from being little in his own eyes to being great in his own eyes and suffered severe consequences. It is hard to reconcile this Biblical picture with the modern teaching that we ought to build up our self-image. Do we really think it will work better for us than it did for Saul?

The Old Testament is filled with such examples: Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, Haman, countless pagan kings and numerous evil Hebrew kings followed the path of self exaltation to destruction, being inspired by Satan who first engaged in this sin. Consider **Isaiah 14:12-15**:

How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my

throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, To the recesses of the pit.

Some consider this an account of the fall of Lucifer, others merely a description of the king of Babylon (**Isaiah 14:4**). Either way, it clearly shows that self-exaltation is an evil attitude. It is antithetical to the attitude of Jesus that we are instructed to emulate (**Philippians 2:5-8**). Those who teach that humans by nature think too lowly of themselves and need therapy to learn to think more highly of themselves must consider the Bible to be completely in error on this matter. Its testimony is universally consistent and is found from Genesis to Revelation.

Genesis and the Self

In Genesis the Serpent tempted the first humans to find out what the independent self, seeking to exalt itself to godhood was all about. The first three chapters of Genesis are very instructive about this matter. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had individual identity, but a lack of a negative, distorted self-consciousness that was shown by the fact that they were naked and not ashamed (**Genesis 2:25**). Contrary to the Hindu, pantheistic view in which the existence of the individual self is a temporary illusion to be ultimately absorbed into the whole in which no individual identity exists, God created Adam and Eve as valid individuals with distinct identities. Some types of polytheism offer the false hope that humans can ascend to godhood. Here then the self is seen to exist as a distinct identity, but this inflated self is on a mission to become autonomous deity. This is a reflection of the attitude expressed in **Isaiah 14:12-15**. The Biblical self was created to exist in a dependent relationship with God and mutually supportive relationship with others. Self is neither ascending to deification nor being absorbed into the “cosmic mind of the universe” to lose its identity.

The relationship that Adam had with God, Eve and the rest of the creation was in perfect and blessed order. Humans be-

fore the Fall were given responsibility, creativity, and close relationship with one another.

*Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.” For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (**Genesis 2:18,19; 22-25**)*

This blessed situation was soon to be destroyed by sin. They were to choose to follow the Serpent's temptation to self-exaltation and thereby achieve not godhood as they hoped, but the birth of the autonomous, self-conscious, guilty, cursed, fearful, needy **self**.

An examination of the immediate effects of their rebellion will help us see some of these changes. The serpent's temptation involved a refutation of the Word of God and an implication that the results of sin would somehow be good. “And the serpent said to the woman, “You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (**Genesis 3:4,5**). Eve was tempted to leave her rightful, blessed place described in **Genesis 1 & 2** to “ascend” to a forbidden, “godlike” place of autonomous “knowing.” When she and her husband transgressed the one law that had been given them, they did not obtain a better life with their new knowledge, but crossed the line into immediate spiritual death (separation from God) and future physical death and eternal judgment. What we are concerned with here is the effect this had on the “self.” This is where the self as it is understood in the rest of Scripture

had its beginning.

Shame and Self-consciousness

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (**Genesis 3:6,7**). The first result recorded here is a different type of self-consciousness than existed before the Fall. In **Genesis 2** Adam was cognizant of his own existence, as shown by his use of the personal pronoun “my” (**Genesis 2:23**). However, he was speaking of his relationship with Eve. Self found its place in relationship with God, Eve, and the rest of the creation. Self was not needy or demanding attention and fulfillment. There was no shame because there was no sin.

Now, with eyes newly opened, “self” became the focus. The nakedness that was previously there but unnoticed became a source of shame, needing covering. Clearly there was an immediate, negative effect on self-understanding. Perhaps modern teachers could see this as evidence of “low self-esteem.” They need to remember that the cause of this condition was a temptation to ascend, to be like God. No amount of positive self-talk could convince these naked humans that they need not be ashamed of their nakedness. Once the lid is off and the contents are spilled out of this can, they can not be put back as if nothing had happened.

God did not tell them that their problem was low self-esteem, he covered them. “And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” (**Genesis 3:21**). As fallen sinners, there is no legitimate way to feel good about the way things are, it is too late for that.

When I was a Bible college student in the early 1970's a fellow student shared his testimony. As a teen-ager he had rebelled against God and his parents and run to California. There he took drugs and eventually was living in the woods

with other young people, running naked. He said that they justified what they were doing by stating that this was how it was supposed to be, since Adam and Eve were naked. Later, as a Christian, he said that being a nudist really never worked. No matter how hard they tried, unlike Adam and Eve before the Fall, they still knew they were naked. No “enlightened,” back to nature philosophy can mask our nakedness from ourselves. We need to be covered.

I heard a “Christian” self-help teaching that said that if we have the positive self-image that we ought, we will be able to stand naked in front of a full length mirror and say to ourselves, “I am the most beautiful person in the world.” **It will never work!** We cannot achieve the lack of self-consciousness that Adam and Eve had before the fall by lying to ourselves. We need to be clothed and we know it. Spiritually we need the clothing God provides which involves the shedding of blood, as did the clothing He provided Adam and Eve. Trying to act as if the Fall never happened is like trying to push toothpaste back into a tube.

Fear and Alienation

Genesis 3:8-10 describes the next result of transgressing the law of God: “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.’” There was an obvious, immediate break in their relationship with God. They became separated from God and afraid of His presence. Their relationship with each other and God was changed radically. Self became a problem because it was alienated and afraid.

Alienation and fear are necessary side-effects of spiritual death. God did not lie when He said they would die on the day that they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The relationship with God and each other that was the greatest blessing of the original creation was now broken. The autonomous self that the serpent implied would

be better off was left to fill the void. This self actually became a horrible burden. The independent self has many wants and needs but cannot find satisfaction. **It craves relationship but always ruins relationships because its own desires always take precedent over those of others.** This destroys relationships, furthers the sense of alienation, deepens the needs and cravings, and thereby drives the self in ways that only make the problem worse.

Except for a supernatural solution from God, the situation is hopeless. Satan and the world offer false solutions that do not require submission to God; but involve seeking self-fulfillment in this life through the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life (**1John 2:16** - compare **Genesis 3:6**). The offer of Satan (see his temptation of Jesus in **Luke 4:1-13**) is for self to seek fulfillment through the independent seeking of its own self-perceived welfare that began the problem in the Garden of Eden.

Only a renewed relationship with God can give us the freedom from the cursed, selfish desires that always drive us but never fulfill us. Reformation of the self is insufficient because superficial changes can only mask the underlying motivational and relational problems. Relationship with God is restored through a death, Christ's death on the cross and our faith in Christ that makes His crucifixion our crucifixion. “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” (**Romans 6:6,7**).

The “old self” is of the type that Adam and Eve had after the fall. Without the cross, there is no remedy for the self-ruling and self-seeking motivations that plague humans. The nature of the independent, autonomous self does not change. Teaching people to love and esteem it might make them feel a little better about the situation, but it cannot change the nature of the problem. This self that we try to feel good about is alienated and afraid because of sin, not because of a lack of the proper “self-talk.”

Self-justification

And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” And the man said, “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.” Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

(**Genesis 3:11-13**)

Another effect of rebellion against God was self-justification. The man refused to take responsibility for his action and blamed God and his wife. The woman blamed the serpent. Another aspect of the self that is universally present in fallen man is that we would like to find an “out,” a means to shift the blame for our own failures. This desire for self-justification probably explains the popularity of the numerous deterministic theories and philosophies. Whatever is wrong with us, something, some force, some cosmic mechanism, some person, anything but our own willfully chosen actions, are responsible for whatever is wrong.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin (**John 16:8**). It is necessary for the third person of the trinity to convict of sin because we will not of our own accord acknowledge sin to be what it is and voluntarily accept God's solution for it. God must act upon us to cause us even to acknowledge our guilt, sin and need for redemption. Man-made religions contrive systems of salvation by works because God's gracious plan of salvation is too unflattering to us. The tendency to self-justification and self-help (the fig leaf approach - **Genesis 3:7**) is universal. “Whatever is wrong with me, I did not cause it, but I surely am going to fix it” is the prevailing opinion of humankind. God says that **we** caused and only **He** can fix it.

Hope in the Midst of a Curse

The results of Adam and Eve's sin and subsequent responses are the curses pronounced in **Genesis 3:14-19**. These curses involved their relationship to one another and creation. I recently heard an interesting explanation of the curse upon the woman. Eve led her husband into sin and then she was married to a sinner. The relationship between wife and husband that had been a blessing became a source of difficulty and conflict.

The relationship of Adam with the non-human creation that had been good and blessed became for him a source of pain and sorrow. Tilling and keeping the ground became sweat, toil, and thorns. Rather than freely eating of the God-created trees that were good for food and pleasant to the sight, including the tree of life (**Genesis 2:9**), he was driven from the garden and the tree of life and forced work in an unfavorable environment facing death, and separated from the life of God (**Genesis 3:22-24**). All of their relationships: with God, other created beings, inanimate creation, each other, and their own selves had been negatively influenced by their attempt at ascendancy to godhood. Life became truly cursed.

However, in **Genesis 3** the hope for redemption is also given. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed;

He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel" (**Genesis 3:15**). This message to the serpent foreshadows the Redeemer who would come from the seed of the woman. It has been said that the Bible is an elaboration of the theme of Messianic salvation, first revealed in this verse.

Mankind was created in God's image for a good and blessed purpose, cursed because of sin, promised redemption through a Redeemer who is born of promise through the seed of Eve, and ultimately a chosen remnant of humans receives deliverance from the groaning and sorrow that has characterized life since the Fall. Those who are in Christ are delivered from the death that was theirs in Adam (see **Romans 5**).

Self-esteem in Light of the Fall

As we hope for the final consummation of this purpose, we still have to deal with a fruit of the Fall, the "old self" as Paul calls it. This is the autonomous self, always desiring and never fully achieving its over-arching goal, **self-fulfillment in this life without submission to God**. Modern teaching offers self-esteem and self-love as its inadequate solution to this problem. If we just would feel better about ourselves, we would become motivated to be good citizens, loving parents, husband, wives, brothers or sisters, and productive Christians. According to Genesis and the Biblical record that follows, humans in fact do not have good reason to feel good about themselves. Rather than view themselves in too bad of a light, they like Adam and Eve blame God and others while hiding their own responsibility. After all, self-exaltation ("you shall be like God") was the hook that lured them into their new, auto-

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mous state. It is not surprising that this motivation lies not too deeply beneath the surface of everything humans do.

It is shocking that sincere Christians suggest that the solution is to throw gas on the fire by esteeming and loving this "self" that was born in its present state at the Fall. It seems inexplicable that not only does the self-esteem doctrine receive promotion from some powerful Evangelical leaders, but has ascended to the status of the majority report. Somehow, a teaching that is found nowhere in Scripture, is at odds with what is taught from Genesis to Revelation, and is manifestly dangerous because it promotes the very problem that is at the root of the sin nature has converted most of a generation of Christians.

There are many arguments and counter arguments about this issue to be explored. There are many Scriptures that bear particularly upon the doctrine of self-esteem we have not yet considered. Next month we will look at the specifics of the modern debate, keeping in mind the basic concepts that we have examined in this study of the self in the first chapters of Genesis.

From beginning to end, the Bible sees humans as prone to think highly of themselves and to ignore their wretched condition. The book of Revelation concludes what Genesis begins. In it we read, "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed. . . ." (**Revelation 3:17,18a**). Only God can cover the shame of our nakedness. True riches come from God, not one's positive self concept.

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